Ambitious Women: Gender and Voter Perceptions of Candidate Ambition*

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Abstract

Are ambitious women punished in politics? Building on literature from negotiation, we argue that women candidates who are perceived to be ambitious are more likely to face social backlash. We first explore what the term 'ambitious' means to voters, developing and testing a new multidimensional concept of perceived ambition, from desire to run for higher office to scope of agenda. We then test the link between these 'ambitious' traits and voter support for candidates using five conjoint experiments in two countries, the U.S. and the U.K. Our results show that while ambitious women are not penalized overall, the aggregate results hide differences in taste for ambitious women across parties. We find that in the U.S. left-wing voters are more likely to support women with progressive ambition than right-wing voters (difference of 7 percentage points), while in the U.K. parties are not as divided. Our results suggest that ambitious women candidates in the U.S. face bias particularly in the context of non-partisan races (like primaries and local elections), when voters cannot rely on party labels to make decisions.

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> When men are ambitious, it's just taken for granted. Well of course they should be ambitious. When women are ambitious, why?
>
> –Barack Obama[1]

In the discussion of Hillary Clinton's campaign, and the post-mortem about her loss, the idea that her 'unbridled ambition'[2] cost her votes gained traction. In the quotation above from a 2016 interview, then-President Obama suggests that ambition might be a political liability for women, but not men. The notion that ambitious women might be less palatable in politics is complicated by the success of women like Sarah Palin and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who seemed to benefit from perceived ambitiousness. Palin was viewed as an ambitious 'maverick' who would drastically change the mainstream agenda, a perception that propelled her popularity ratings above both McCain and Obama following the Republican National Convention in 2008.[3] On the other side of the aisle, Ocasio-Cortez also reaped the benefits of being seen as 'ambitious', in her aspiration for higher office,[4] "bold" and "determined" personality,[5] and agenda focusing on the "most ambitious ideas possible for working-class Americans."[6] Looking across advanced democracies, women are underrepresented in leadership roles (O'Brien 2015), but have taken the helm of even far right, anti-feminist parties – such as Alice Weidel of the German AfD, described as a 'dominant character', assertive and determined.[7] This paper investigates two questions that can help shed light on these trends: first, how do voters perceive ambition in candidates? Second, are 'ambitious women' punished in politics?

Ambition can be thought of in two ways: internal ambition, or an individual's own goals to achieve some outcome, and perceived ambition, or the way that others view an individual's

[1]Interview with Samantha Bee, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, 31 October 2016.

[2]Shear, Michael. "Colin Powell, in Hacked Emails, Shows Scorn for Trump and Irritation at Clinton." *The New York Times.* 14 September 2016.

[3]McCormack, John. "Rasmussen: Palin More Popular Than Obama and McCain." *The Weekly Standard.* 5 September 2008.

[4]Roberts, Georgette and Joe Tacopino. "Ocasio-Cortez wants to be president, mom says." *New York Post.* 27 June 2018.

[5]Denvir, Daniel. "Bernie Sanders: Bold Politics Is Good Politics" *Jacobin.* 16 July 2018.

[6]Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. @Ocasio2018. Tweet. 30 June 2018, 9:08 AM.

[7]Amann, Melanie and Sven Becker. "How Far to the Right Is Alice Weidel?" *Spiegel Online.* 4 May 2017.

drive. Our study deals with the latter concept. All political candidates might be seen as somewhat ambitious given that they are running for office, but we make the case that there is variation among how ambitious candidates are seen to be, and that this might matter. To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to explore *voter perceptions* of candidate ambition, and whether they are gendered. A robust literature from gender and politics explores internal ambition as a dependent variable (why don't more women run for office? e.g., Fox & Lawless 2005; Lawless & Pearson 2008; Fox & Lawless 2011*b*; Kanthak & Woon 2015; Shames 2017), and also shows that gender stereotypes can affect voter support for women candidates (e.g., Mo 2015; Bauer 2017; Cassese & Holman 2017; Ditonto 2017; Anzia & Bernhard 2019). Yet, ambition as a perceived trait (independent variable) which might help or hinder candidates has been under-explored in the literature.

We build on previous work from the field of negotiation, which finds that women seeking a promotion are penalized (Bowles, Babcock & Lai 2007; Tinsley et al. 2009), by defining and testing several types of candidate ambition and its interaction with gender. Moving beyond the well-established notion of progressive ambition in politics (internal desire to reach higher office; Schlesinger 1966), we develop a multidimensional concept consisting of four different types of perceived ambition: Progressive (aiming for higher office), Personalistic (personality traits like determined to succeed or tough), Agenda-based (scope or breadth of proposed policies), and Parental (juggling family responsibilities with public life). We then test the link between these 'ambitious' traits and voter support for candidates using five conjoint survey experiments in the U.S. and U.K., with a collective sample size of nearly 4,000 respondents. In the experiments, respondents evaluate pairs of hypothetical candidates, and information about candidate gender and level of ambition is randomized. The advantage of using conjoint experiments to study this question is that they allow us to learn about the effects of many different types of candidate ambition (and their interactions with gender) on vote choice.

We find evidence supporting the relevance of three of the four types of perceived ambition:

Progressive, Agenda-based, and Personalistic. The good news is that, overall and across both countries, we find no evidence that voters are less likely to support ambitious women than their male counterparts. However, the aggregate analysis hides large differences in taste across respondent party. In the U.S., Republicans are less likely to support women with progressive ambition compared to Democrats (difference of 7 percentage points). These differences hold in the context of nonpartisan races, where candidates' party ID is not given (such as primaries, many local elections, and in comparative context, open-list PR systems), whereas respondents rely on party ID above all else when it is given. Our initial evidence from the U.K. suggests that these differences might not describe a general left-right pattern across countries. In the U.K., Conservatives (a party which has had two women leaders) are actually most favorable towards women with progressive ambition, although the difference in levels of support across parties is not significant. The results are both uplifting and underscore ongoing challenges on the right in the U.S., where 'ambitious women' face a delicate balancing act, particularly in early stages of their political careers when they must compete with other candidates within the same party. Overall, the findings suggest that defining and disaggregating voter perceptions of 'ambition' in politics is an important piece of the puzzle in understanding how voters evaluate male and female candidates, which is different across partisan identities.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature on ambition and gender to develop a multidimensional concept of candidate ambition. We argue that perceived ambition is negative for women, and that tastes for 'ambitious women' are likely to be conditioned by voter partisanship and gender. We test these claims using data from five survey experiments, going on to present results and discuss their implications.

Ambition and Gender in Politics

To develop the concept of perceived ambitiousness in politics and consider how it might be gendered, we build on insights from the literature on political careers, gender and politics, and negotiation. The seminal political science literature on ambition as a candidate characteristic dates back to the work of Joseph Schlesinger (1966). Schlesinger distinguishes three types of ambition: 1) progressive (desire to seek next highest office available); 2) static (happy to stay in current level of office); and 3) discrete (seek political office for a limited term and plan to return to private life afterwards). In this framework, the most ambitious politicians are those that seek higher office (progressive). Subsequent literature from the field of political careers explores determinants of progressive ambition (Rohde 1979; Squire 1988; Costantini 1990; Samuels 2003; Maestas et al. 2006) and the effects of progressive ambition on other outcomes, such as legislative decisions (Hibbing 1986; Herrick & Moore 1993; Treul 2009), policy responsiveness (Maestas 2000), and campaign strategies (Sieberer & Müller 2017). This literature thus does not engage with the question of how *voters* evaluate ambitious politicians, or how this might be gendered.

A large literature from gender and politics picks up and develops the line of research on political ambition as a dependent variable, and a key finding underlying this research is that, 'when women run, they win' (Darcy & Schramm 1977; Burrell 1992; Gaddie & Bullock 1997; Lawless & Pearson 2008). Given this, much of the literature has moved to looking at what is blocking the supply of female candidates. Fox and Lawless (2005) developed the concept of 'nascent political ambition' to distinguish the potential interest in office seeking that must occur before someone can have discrete, static, or progressive ambition. Recent literature focuses on the explanations of gender differences in political socialization and recruitment (Fox & Lawless 2004; Lawless & Fox 2005; Fox & Lawless 2010, 2011*a*, 2014; Fulton et al. 2006; Preece, Stoddard & Fisher 2016; Schneider et al. 2016), gender gaps in perceived costs and rewards (Shames 2017), and the personal and family circumstances of ordinary women (Crowder-Meyer 2018). Outside the U.S., scholars more

often highlight the demand side of the equation, pointing to the role of party gatekeepers, electoral systems, and social structures (Allen & Cutts 2017; Piscopo 2018).

Past research finds little evidence of outright discrimination against women candidates (Teele, Kalla & Rosenbluth 2017; Schwarz, Hunt & Coppock 2018), and some studies even show a preference for women at lower levels (Abney & Peterson 2011; Matson & Fine 2006; Andersen & Ditonto 2018; Crowder-Meyer, Gadarian & Trounstine 2015). Women candidates are not disadvantaged, but they are not highly advantaged either – and this is a puzzle because women who run for higher offices are very well-qualified, even more so than their male peers (Black & Erickson 2000; Lawless & Pearson 2008; Fulton 2012; Pearson & McGhee 2013). Yet, the gender bonus dissipates in high level races. The main explanation for this is that party cues are stronger than gender (Dolan 2004, 2014; Hayes 2011), but even in congressional primary elections, where party is held constant, women win at similar rates to men (Lawless & Pearson 2008), despite being stronger candidates (Pearson & McGhee 2004). This highlights the potential importance of other information (aside from party) which becomes available as candidates move up the electoral ladder – such as voter knowledge about personal attributes like ambition.

The literatures from negotiation and dominance offer evidence that ambition can be a negative trait for women, and a logic for why this might be. Studies find that women and men are treated differently when they attempt to negotiate for a promotion, with women being penalized more than men (Bowles, Babcock & Lai 2007; Tinsley et al. 2009). The theory of role congruity suggests that prejudice results from an inconsistency between the stereotypical female gender role (the fact that traditionally women held private caregiving and support roles, while men were involved in public life) and the leader role (Eagly & Karau 2002). Women who negotiate are punished for deviating from these social norms, unless they negotiate on behalf of others or build their negotiation around organizational relationships (Bowles & Babcock 2013; Mazei et al. 2015; Hekman et al. 2017). Women – but not men – who are promoted to top jobs are also more likely to get divorced (Folke & Rickne 2020). A recent meta-analysis of studies evaluating individuals behaving dominantly

(in negotiation and otherwise) confirms that dominant women tend to be penalized (Williams & Tiedens 2016). Similarly, while stereotypes about women's competence have equalized in recent years along with changes in women's education, workforce participation, and gender egalitarian attitudes (Donnelly et al. 2016), gender stereotypes about men's relative advantage in agency remain constant over time (Eagly et al. 2019). Women seem to be aware that ambition is penalized: they are less likely to initiate negotiations (Lauterbach & Weiner 1996), they under-report their true level of ambition when they think it will be seen by peers, and they worry about seeming too ambitious (Bursztyn, Fujiwara & Pallais 2017). These studies highlight the need for a more nuanced approach to ambition in order to understand when women candidates might experience a backlash, and when they will not.

This paper explores whether the same logic applies to politics: are women penalized for attempting to negotiate for the prize of higher political office, for angling for an authoritative, leadership role? The political realm is a natural extension of this line of research on whether women are penalized for displaying dominant, agentic traits, since political office is one of the most visible examples in society of leadership and authority roles. Within political science, the topic has received little attention. Two experimental studies are particularly relevant. Okimoto and Brescoll (2010) use a survey experiment where respondents are asked to view politician's website biographies, that are identical except for gender. They find that when additional sentences are added to the biography describing the candidate as 'ambitious' and having a 'will to power', respondents are less likely to say they would vote for the female candidate, but more likely to say that they would vote for the male candidate (these simple effects were only marginally significant). While the results are in the direction we expect, the N of the survey is low (230 U.S. respondents) and the sample is heavily weighted towards women. Another experimental study looking at gender and leadership traits finds a preference for assertive over tentative women: tentative female leaders were found to be less likeable and less influential than assertive female leaders (N = 185, Australian student sample; Bongiorno, Bain & David 2014).

One reason for the mixed findings might be that these studies do not allow us to understand how voters perceive ambition; we only know that given information that the candidate is ambitious or assertive, voters respond differently to men and women. We build on this important initial evidence by breaking down the concept of ambition in order to understand how voters perceive it (our key theoretical contribution, which extends beyond gender). These studies also point to the need for a larger, non-student sample that allows for adequate investigation of respondent gender and ideology. We leverage conjoint experiments to test multiple types of ambition, providing tests of interactions between candidate gender and perceived ambition, as well as the role of respondent characteristics such as ideology (main empirical contribution).

A Multidimensional Concept of Perceived Candidate Ambition

We develop four concepts of perceived ambition which are later tested in the survey experiments: Progressive, Personalistic, Agenda-based, and Parental.

Progressive ambition (desire to run for higher office) is the most common definition of candidate ambition from the literature (dating back to Schlesinger 1966), and so this is our starting point. However, this might not capture all the ways voters conceive of ambition in political candidates. Ambitiousness also connotes a personality trait, as a wilful desire and determination to achieve. Studies of politician traits often include personal characteristics that are more or less ambitious, along the lines of this interpretation. For example, Laustsen (2017) finds that liberals prefer 'warm' types of candidates (described as cooperative, empathetic, a good communicator) while conservatives prefer 'powerful' types (defined as a tough negotiator who can create results). Dynes, Hassell, and Miles (2019) find a strong connection between personality traits such as extraversion and nascent ambition that is distinct from progressive ambition. We expect perceived personalistic ambition to be related to certain agentic personality traits, which scholars have argued are gendered. A large meta-analysis, for example, concludes that leadership stereotypes are culturally masculine,

particularly in the agency-communion paradigm, in which agentic traits are broadly defined as dominant and competitive versus warm and gentle (i.e., communal, feminine traits) (Koenig et al. 2011). Candidates described as 'determined to succeed' or 'assertive' ought to be considered more ambitious than those described as 'empathetic' or 'collaborative' (*Personalistic ambition*).

Another type of ambition relates to the scope of a politician's agenda. Do they desire to make big changes to the current state of play, or not? A common campaign theme in U.S. politics is that of the political 'maverick' who wants to make big changes to politics as usual (Barr 2009). For example, when Donald Trump entered office, the *L.A. Times* described his agenda as the 'most sweeping conservative agenda in decades'.[8] A similar idea of ambition is presented in studies of political mavericks who boldly 'trailblaze', unafraid to challenge the status quo and overhaul policies (Pulichino & Coughlin 2005; Ditto & Mastronarde 2009). The third type of ambition thus relates to what a candidate plans to do in office, in terms of policy innovation or scope: *Agenda-based ambition*.

Finally, the concept of *Parental ambition* is inspired by the additional responsibilities that having a family and caring responsibilities entail, particularly for women. Women still take on the bulk of caring and household labor in families with children (see, e.g., Hochschild & Machung 2012; Bertrand, Kamenica & Pan 2015). Mothers might be seen as more 'ambitious' than fathers for taking on the added responsibilities that campaigns and public life entail, particularly given research demonstrating that women become *less* politically engaged as they have children (Quaranta & Dotti Sani 2018). The opposite could also be true: in many fields, including politics, women at the top of their profession are much less likely to have children. For example, in a 2013 survey, Campbell and Childs (2014) find that 45% of female MPs in the U.K. are childless, compared to 28% of male MPs. Women with no children might be seen to have 'sacrificed' motherhood for career, and thus be perceived as more ambitious. Our expectations regarding the direction of the link between parenthood and perceived ambition are thus tentative; either childlessness or having

[8]Mascaro, Lisa, "Congress opens with an ambitious agenda for the Trump era," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 January 2017.

many children could be associated with ambition (particularly for women).

Below is a summary:

1. **Progressive**: ambitious candidates seek promotion (higher office)
2. **Personalistic**: ambitious candidates are 'determined', 'tough', 'assertive' types
3. **Agenda-based**: ambitious candidates target major reforms
4. **Parental**: ambitious candidates have more children, or ambitious candidates have no children

Hypotheses: Effects of Perceived Ambitiousness

The first stage of analysis is to assess whether the multidimensional concept of perceived ambition finds support in voter evaluations of candidate ambition. However, the main argument is focused on the second stage, where we explore how voter support for candidates varies across both candidate gender and level of ambition. Our main hypothesis derives from the findings from negotiation that ambitious women are penalized. We expect this to hold in the context of politics:

> **Hypothesis 1:** *All else equal, ambitious women candidates are more likely to be punished by voters than ambitious men.*

Not all voters will react to ambitious women in the same way. Left-wing parties tend to be associated with egalitarian values, and have historically supported the women's movement (Jenson 2018). Right-wing parties instead tend to be more socially conservative, and often historically promoted traditional gender roles in society (Sanbonmatsu 2004; Wolbrecht 2010; Elder & Greene 2012). Recent work shows that these cultural differences persist even today—for example, in the U.S., the Republican party is much less willing to support demands for more women in office compared to the Democrats (Crowder-Meyer & Cooperman 2018). Women on the right in the U.S. are less likely to be elected in congressional elections than their male peers, but no such differences

exist on the left (Bucchianeri 2018). This pattern may have worsened over time, with Republican women facing an even tougher electoral environment in recent years (Thomsen 2019). The strongest support for women's equality is often seen in parties of the new left (such as Green parties) (Keith & Verge 2016), while far right parties express the most regressive attitudes, including support for traditional gender roles and opposition to women's rights (Köttig, Bitzan & Petö 2017). We thus expect left-wing voters (Democrats in the U.S. and Labour party supporters in the U.K.) to be more supportive of ambitious women candidates than their counterparts on the right (Republicans, Conservatives) and especially the far right (UK Independent Party or UKIP supporters).

> **Hypothesis 2:** *Left-wing voters are more supportive of ambitious women candidates than supporters of right-wing parties, especially the far right.*

Respondent gender might also matter, although here the literature provides less support for clear subgroup differences. The literature from negotiation finds that both men and women penalize women who ask for promotions (Bowles, Babcock & Lai 2007). Yet, the evidence for a 'gender affinity' effect in politics (whereby under certain conditions women voters prefer women candidates and vice versa) suggests that women might be more supportive of ambitious women candidates than men (Sanbonmatsu 2002; Brians 2005). This might be true especially if gender consciousness is heightened, for example with increased media attention to women in politics (or lack thereof), leading women to feel increased solidarity with women candidates (Rudman & Goodwin 2004; Dolan 2008).

> **Hypothesis 3:** *As voters, women are more supportive of ambitious women candidates than men are.*

Data and Methods

We test our expectations regarding gender and ambition through five conjoint survey experiments from 2017 to 2020, four conducted in the United States, and one in the United Kingdom. Table

1 provides information on duration, sample size, purpose, and platform.[9] The Digital Lab for the Social Sciences (the platform for DLABSS 1, 2, and 3) is a volunteer social science lab which is comparable to, if not an improvement on, other online convenience samples such as MTurk (Enos et al. 2018). Survey Sampling International (SSI) is a commonly used platform in political science, and this sample is nationally representative on age, gender, ethnicity, region (all based on projected forward data from the Census), and partisan affiliation (based on a recent Gallup poll). Prolific is a U.K.-based online platform which recruits respondents mainly via social media. The purpose of this survey was to test results in another advanced democracy and also explore taste for ambitious women candidates on the far right (we targeted UKIP voters, of which N = 176). Further details about the surveys, including descriptive statistics, are in the Appendix (Section 1). We note that the experimental survey design employed here lessens concerns about representativeness, since we investigate treatment effects and differences across theoretically relevant subgroups rather than overall population proportions (Teele, Kalla & Rosenbluth 2018; Druckman & Kam 2011). We also include valuable variation in the context and timing of the survey, with multiple surveys fielded in two countries.

The survey asks respondents to imagine they are selecting a candidate for a primary within their party for an open seat for Governor, based on a comparison of resumes (in the U.K., respondents are asked which Member of Parliament they'd prefer to vote for). Following a brief introduction explaining the scenario, respondents are shown several tables, one at a time, with information on candidate gender, future plans, personality, and agenda, as well as other traits. For each table, respondents are instructed to select their preferred candidate. Instead of restricting our analysis to only one or two elements, which is the maximum number of treatment variables that can be changed in vignette experiments, conjoint analysis allows for tests of multiple hypotheses by independently randomizing numerous candidate attributes in a single experiment (Hainmueller,

[9]Replication materials are available in the Political Behavior Dataverse at `https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KVTPVX`.

Table 1: Summary of surveys conducted

Survey	Country	Date	N	Details
1. DLABSS 1	U.S.	Sept-Nov 2017	551	Initial survey
2. SSI	U.S.	Mar 2018	1249	Representative sample, balanced on age, gender, ethnicity, region (Census), and partisan affiliation (based on 2017 Gallup poll)
3. DLABSS 2	U.S.	Aug-Oct 2018	466	Test whether results hold when also including several commonly used candidate traits, such as professional background, age, and type of political experience.
4. Prolific	U.K.	Nov 2018	869	Test whether results hold across another advanced democracy, and test subgroup of far right voters.
5. DLABSS 3	U.S.	Jan-Feb 2020	850	Test whether respondents distinguish different types of ambition, and put findings in context by testing whether results hold when including party ID.
Total			3,985	

Hopkins & Yamamoto 2013).

For each candidate profile in the tables, all attributes are randomly assigned (with no restrictions on the combination of attributes). The order in which the attributes appeared was also randomly assigned, but fixed for each respondent in order to ease cognitive burden. Table 2 contains information on attributes and identifies which type of ambition is being tested for each attribute level. For each respondent, the final election also includes an ambition rating scale, which is presented after the respondent indicates their vote choice (see Section 1 of Appendix for descriptive statistics and survey wording).

Results

In order to understand which factors people associate with ambition, we first present results for the determinants of ambition rating. Estimates are based on results from the final election only (recall that respondents are asked to rate candidates' levels of ambition after only the final election). The quantity of interest is the Average Marginal Component-specific Effect (AMCE), which is

Table 2: Attribute values, corresponding to each ambition type, used to generate candidate profiles.

Attribute	Values	Ambition Type
Gender	Male Female	NA
Talent	Empathetic Collaborative Good Communicator Hard-working Assertive Tough Negotiator Determined to Succeed	*Personalistic*
Future Plans: Has candidate shown interest in running for President?	Yes No	*Progressive*
What kinds of changes to the current political agenda will the candidate bring about?	Very few changes Moderate changes Complete overhaul	*Agenda-based*
Children **ALL EXCEPT DLABSS 1*	0 1 2 3	*Parental*
Party ID **ONLY DLABSS 3*	Republican Democrat	NA

the treatment effect of a particular profile characteristic or value (compared to an attribute base category) averaged over the joint distribution of all other characteristics or values (Hainmueller, Hopkins & Yamamoto 2013). Because each attribute was randomly assigned independent of the value of any of the other attributes, the AMCE can be estimated using a simple linear regression of the outcome variable. The unit of analysis is at the candidate level, such that each respondent creates multiple candidate level observations. We cluster standard errors at the respondent level to account for within-election effects. For most of the discussion below, we present only the SSI results, given that the results from other surveys are consistent (and presented in the Appendix).

Perceptions of Ambition

Results show support for the concepts of Progressive, Agenda-based, and Personalistic ambition (see Figure 1). A candidate who proposes a complete overhaul of the political agenda is perceived to be more ambitious than a candidate who proposes very few changes by +0.8 (on a 11-point scale) on average. Similarly, a candidate with progressive ambition (who indicates interest in running for higher office) sees a +0.6 gain in average perceived ambitiousness compared to a candidate with no progressive ambition. A candidate who is 'determined to succeed' (compared to an empathetic candidate) is perceived to be significantly more ambitious (+1.1). As Figure 1 shows, we do not find evidence that a candidate's number of children is associated with ambition. We checked for interaction effects between candidate gender and all traits – e.g., do voters view women with children to be more ambitious than men with children? We found no evidence that perceptions of ambition are gendered in this way (i.e., no double standard).

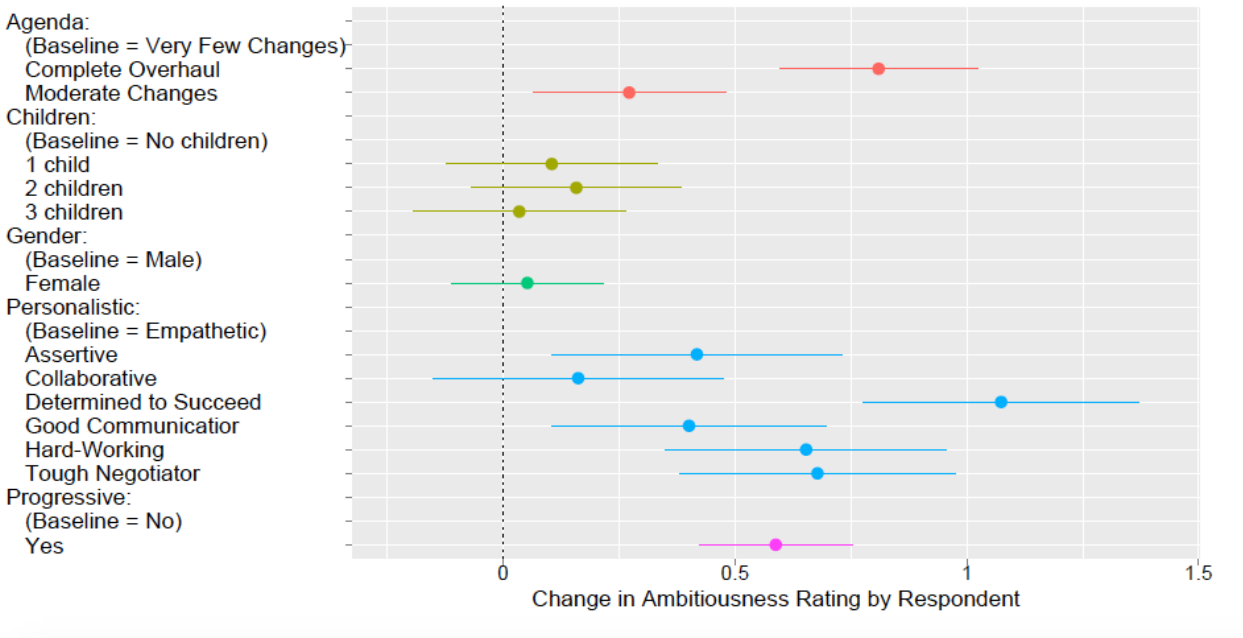

Figure 1: Determinants of Ambition

Figure shows unit increase on 10 point scale measuring perceived ambitiousness of candidate given attributes. Sample size N = 1249 respondents, or at candidate level N = 2484.

Table 3: Profiles of Candidates Rated Most Ambitious

Predicted Treatment Effect	Progressive	Personalistic	Agenda-Based	Gender
1.09	Yes	Determined to Succeed	Complete Overhaul	Female
0.99	Yes	Determined to Succeed	Complete Overhaul	Male
0.79	Yes	Tough Negotiator	Complete Overhaul	Female
0.69	Yes	Tough Negotiator	Complete Overhaul	Male
0.67	Yes	Hard-Working	Complete Overhaul	Female
0.63	Yes	Good Communicator	Complete Overhaul	Female
0.63	Yes	Assertive	Complete Overhaul	Female
0.57	Yes	Hard-Working	Complete Overhaul	Male
0.56	Yes	Determined to Succeed	Moderate Changes	Female
0.53	Yes	Assertive	Complete Overhaul	Male

Results come from analysis of predicted values for unique treatment combinations using the `FindIt` package for `R` version 3.4.3 (Egami, Ratkovic & Imai 2015).

In order to identify the most and least ambitious types of candidates, we estimate the Average Marginal Interaction Effect (AMIE; Egami & Imai 2018) which does not depend on the choice of baseline conditions. AMIEs are nonparametrically estimated using ANOVA regression with weighted zero-sum constraints, and they allow us to estimate predicted values for a large number of different attribute combinations (candidate profiles) (Egami & Imai 2018). Table 3 confirms that the combinations of attributes that induce the largest effects on ambition ratings are Progressive, Agenda-based, and Personalistic ambition. The top ten combinations of "ambitious" candidate traits include candidates who want to run for higher office (Progressive), have ambitious agendas (Agenda-Based), and ambitious personality traits (especially 'determined to succeed'), regardless of gender. The combinations associated with the lowest ambition effects are the opposite: no interest in running for higher office, desires little change to political agenda, and empathetic and collaborative personality traits.[10] Given these results, we focus on Agenda-based, Personalistic, and Progressive ambition in the discussion of vote choice below.

One concern might be that a single question on ambitiousness does not allow us to disentangle

[10]Least Ambitious results available from author. We can only look at four attribute combinations at a time in the FindIt package for R; however, additional analysis where we substitute Parental and Experience-based Ambition for other traits confirms the findings presented here.

whether voters actually perceive different types of candidate ambition. To address this, we field a survey which directly tests whether voters discern distinct types of ambition among distinct types of candidate traits (DLABSS 3). Following the last election, instead of asking a single ambition rating question, we ask respondents to rate how well items corresponding to the three different types of ambition describe the final two candidates. The items are, "They are very eager to achieve higher positions of political power even beyond the one they are currently running for" (*Progressive*), "Their personality can be described as willful, a go-getter" (*Personalistic*), and "They plan to make big changes to politics as usual if elected" (*Agenda-Based*) (italics not included in survey text).

Estimates from regression models show clear support for each of the three distinct types of perceived candidate ambition. Respondents rank candidates who are interested in running for President 2.97 points higher on the 11-point progressive ambition scale ($p < 0.001$), and no other candidate trait is associated with a significant rating increase. Similarly, candidates who are "Determined to succeed" show the largest bump in ranking on the personalistic ambition scale, at a 1.69 increase ($p < 0.001$).[11] Finally, candidates who are described as planning a "Complete overhaul" of the political agenda receive a 4.05 bump on the agenda-based rating scale, by far the largest increase associated with any trait ($p < 0.001$). These results suggest that respondents do perceive different types of candidate ambition, and that our traits accurately convey these different dimensions. See Appendix, Section 5 for coefficient plots.

Determinants of Vote Choice

Not all types of perceived ambition influence vote choice. Figure 2 shows that Progressive Ambition for higher office, which emerged as a clear indicator of higher perceived ambitiousness, is not associated with a significant effect on vote choice. Similarly, while most respondents agree that a candidate who is 'determined to succeed' is ambitious, this does not translate to an edge in the

[11] We note that the agenda-based trait "Complete overhaul" of the political agenda is also associated with a significant and positive bump, but it is smaller at 0.75.

election. On the other hand, there is strong evidence that Agenda-based Ambition affects vote choice. Candidates who propose either moderate or comprehensive changes enjoy a sizable bump of almost 20 percentage points (compared to the baseline of 'Very few changes'). In line with other studies, we find that women candidates enjoy a slight advantage when it comes to vote choice (2%, p = 0.05) (see Schwarz, Hunt & Coppock 2018 for a review).

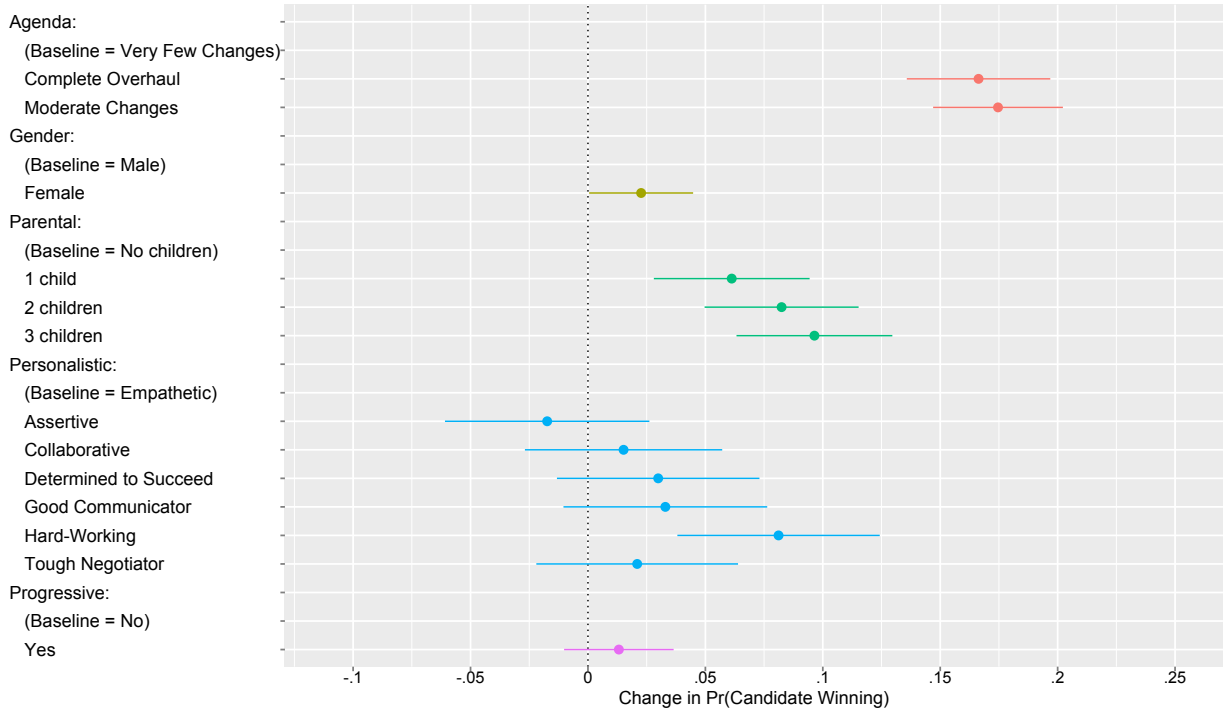

Figure 2: Determinants of Vote Choice

Figures show percentage point change in probability of winning. Sample size N = 1249 respondents, or at candidate level N = 7480.

Contrary to the expectations of Hypothesis 1, we find no evidence that voters penalize ambitious women. To test this hypothesis, we present results by randomly assigned candidate gender, and then show the interaction between candidate gender and ambitious traits, which is equivalent to the difference in means between male and female candidates. Figure 3 shows the results first for only male candidates (left panel), then female candidates (middle), and finally the interaction (difference; right panel). Across all three traits that voters link to candidate ambition (progressive

office-seeking, personalistic traits, and scope of agenda), women are not evaluated differently from men. The confidence intervals for interactions include zero (right panel), so we cannot reject the null hypothesis that ambitious male and female candidates are evaluated similarly. This result is consistent across all surveys (see Appendix, pages 15-17).

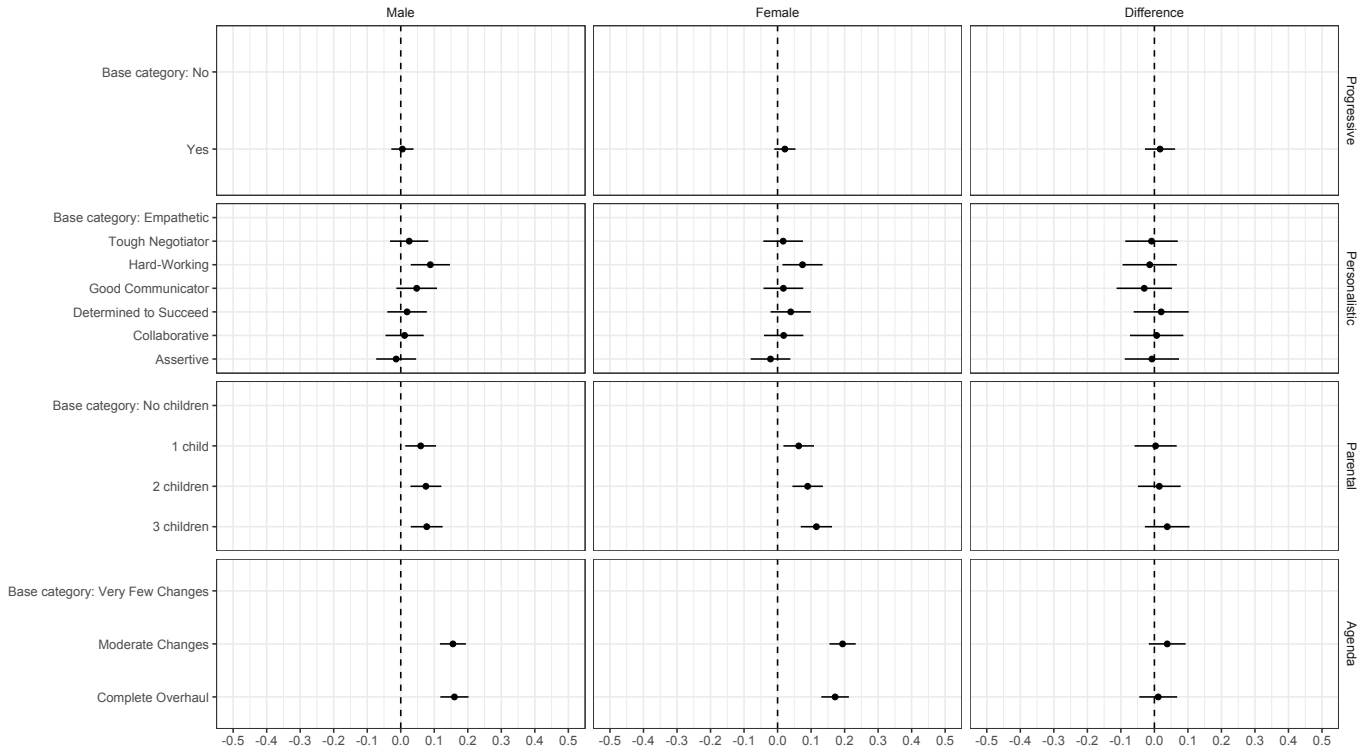

Figure 3: Determinants of Vote Choice by Gender of Candidate

Figures show percentage point change in probability of winning for male candidates (left), female candidates (center), and the interaction between candidate gender and other traits (equivalent to the difference in means between subgroups). Sample size N = 1249 respondents, or at candidate level N = 7480.

We also looked at the interaction between candidate gender and level of ambition, using the full range of values from the estimated treatment effects produced by the Average Marginal Interaction Effects. For this analysis, AMIEs were calculated using attribute combinations of three traits: Personalistic, Progressive, and Agenda-based ambition. Unlike in Table 3, gender is not included, because we then interact perceived ambitiousness based on these traits with candidate gender. The marginal effects plot shown in Figure 4 confirms that women are more favored compared to men

as perceived ambitiousness levels go up, but that the difference between men and women is not significant (regression model in Appendix, Table A4).

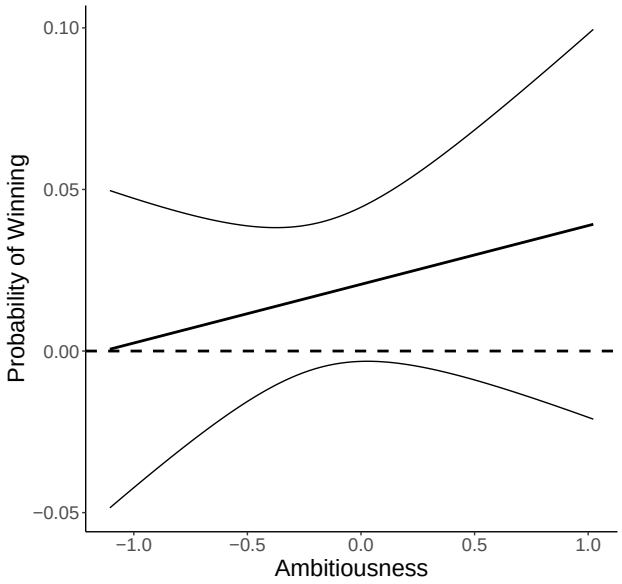

Figure 4: Marginal effect of female gender conditional on ambitiousness

Marginal effects derived from a regression including the interaction of female gender and perceived ambitiousness (as predicted by the Average Marginal Interaction Effects using FindIt), where interactions of Personalistic, Progressive, and Agenda-based ambition are included. Standard errors are clustered by ID (see Appendix, Table A4 for regression model).

While the overall results show that ambitious women candidates are not penalized, the aggregate findings might hide important differences by respondent partisanship and gender. Because hypotheses 2 and 3 concern differences in subgroup preferences, below we present conditional marginal means by subgroup, and the differences in conditional marginal means. This is because comparisons of AMCEs between subgroups of respondents are sensitive to the reference category used in regression analysis. This can lead to inferences with different signs, size and significance depending on which arbitrary reference category is selected (Leeper, Hobolt & Tilley 2020). Conditional marginal means are interpreted as probabilities: for example, a marginal mean of .5 indicates that respondents select profiles with that feature level with probability .5. Since we are interested in the interaction between candidate gender and ambitious traits, we estimate marginal

means for combinations of candidate gender (male and female) and the traits associated with ambition, comparing across subgroups. In order to make the plots easier to read, we include only the combinations of gender and most and least ambitious traits here; the full results can be found in the Appendix.

Hypothesis 2 suggests that right-wing voters are less likely to support ambitious women than their left-wing counterparts, and we expect this to be true especially for those identifying with far right parties. To test this hypothesis, we evaluate Republican and Democrat subgroups in the United States (Figure 5), and Labour, Conservative, and UKIP subgroups in the United Kingdom (Figure 6). Looking at the U.S. first, Democrats are more likely to support female candidates with progressive ambition than Republicans (marginal means of 0.55 vs. 0.48, a difference of 7 percentage points, p=0.01). This finding is replicated across two of the other U.S. based surveys (DLABSS 1 and DLABSS 2) at standard levels of significance (the exception is DLABSS 3, when we include the candidate trait of party ID, discussed below).[12] The opposite is true for ambitious men, whom Republicans are more likely to support (gap of 5 percentage points, p<0.1). For agenda-based ambition, we see similar trends – women who propose to bring major changes to the current political agenda are more favored by Democrats than Republicans (marginal means of 0.58 vs. 0.53), but this difference is not significant. There are no significant differences between Democrats and Republicans on women with personalistic ambition. However, we note that Republicans support men with personalistic ambition ('tough negotiator' and 'determined to succeed') more than Democrats, while women with personalistic ambition are not similarly favored.

One concern might be that the party difference in taste for ambitious women is driven by a general difference in support for women across parties. In a model including candidate gender with no interactions, we do find that Democrats favor women more than Republicans (difference of 5 percentage points),[13] but we note that this difference is less than the difference in support for

[12]For DLABSS 1, marginal means for Democrats and Republicans for women with progressive ambition are 0.56 and 0.42 (p<0.001), and for DLABBS 2, 0.54 and 0.46 (p=0.02).

[13]See Replication Files.

ambitious women. Indeed, the only other interaction between female gender and a candidate trait found to be significant in the results shown in Figure 5 is empathetic women. They are disfavored by Republicans, but so are empathetic men (i.e. empathy rather than gender is disfavored). Thus, the distaste for ambitious women could be driving a general gap in support for women across parties, rather than the other way around.

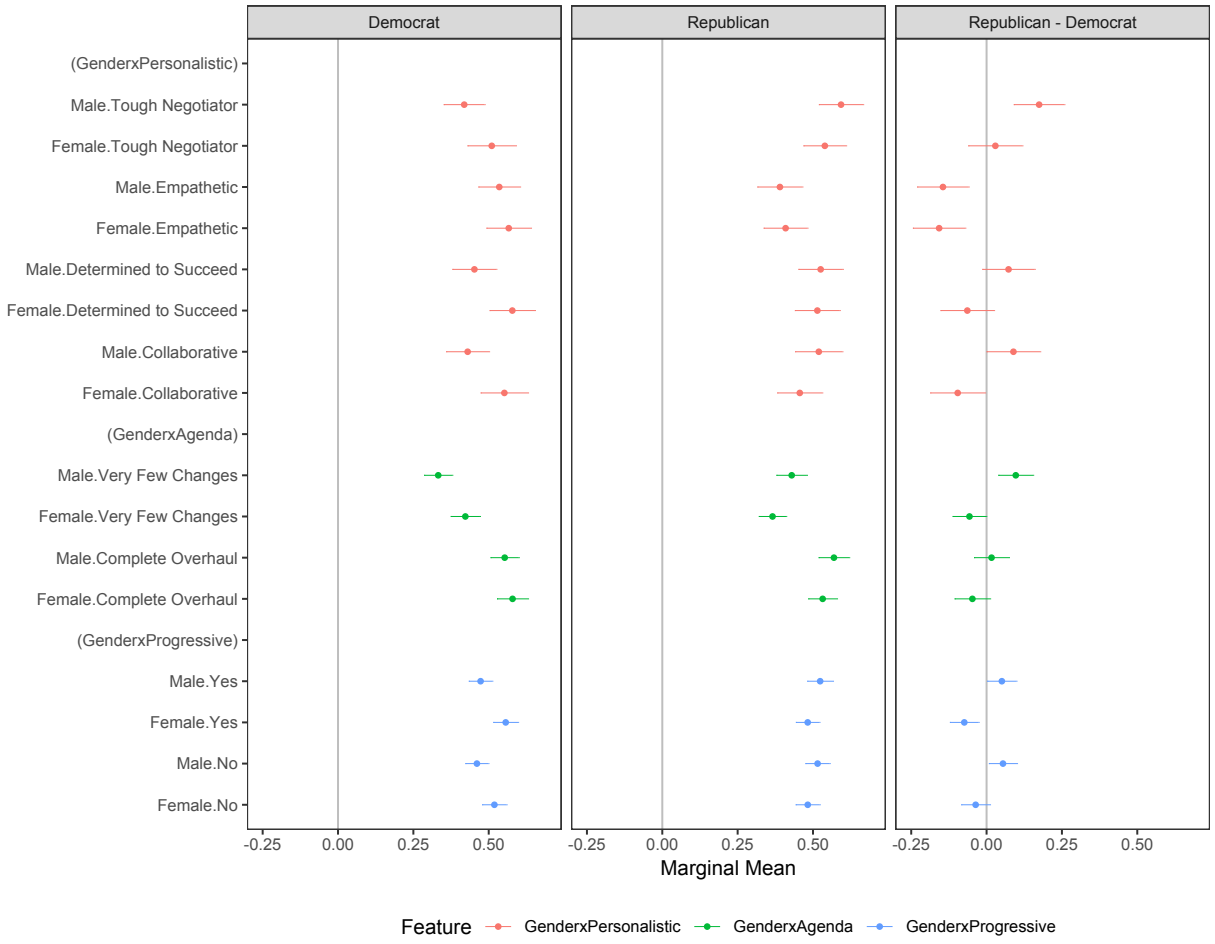

Figure 5: Conditional Marginal Means by Gender of Candidate, Republicans and Democrats

Figures show favorability toward candidate profiles for respondents identifying as Democrat (left panel), Republican (center panel), and the difference (right panel) using conditional marginal means (where the '.' between candidate gender and attribute level on the y-axis signifies an interaction). Sample size N = 795 (391 Republican + 404 Democrat), or at candidate level N = 4770. Only relevant individual trait coefficients presented; for full plot, see Appendix, Figure A19.

The result that right-wing voters are less likely to support women with progressive ambition than left-wing voters does not hold when party ID is given as a candidate trait. In the fourth

and final U.S. survey (DLABSS 3), we include party ID in order to put the results in context – under what conditions are gendered evaluations of candidate ambition likely to matter? When party ID is given, it has more explanatory power than any other candidate trait, and Democrats and Republicans do not evaluate ambitious women any differently from ambitious men (see Appendix, Figure A23). In line with previous findings, this suggests that in the absence of party labels, voters will turn to other candidate traits to make decisions (Kirkland & Coppock 2017). Candidate gender plays an important role when partisan voters cannot use party label as a heuristic – particularly for Republicans, who tend to penalize women when party is not given (Ono & Burden 2019). Our results help to further refine what we know about this bias – agentic ambition to progress in politics is particularly detrimental for women but not men, on the right. The implication is that ambitious women face bias from voters who lean right in non-partisan races, including primary elections, many local elections, and (in comparative context) open-list PR systems where candidates from the same party compete against each other. We note that these contexts are common and could pose acute problems for women candidates at various stages of their political careers.

In order to further explore the reasons behind the partisan gap in taste for women with progressive ambition, we analyze open-ended survey response data from the DLABSS 2 survey. In this survey, we asked the following question after the last and final election: "Thinking about the last election involving Candidate 9 and Candidate 10, please explain your choice. Why did you pick one candidate over the other?". We subset this data to respondents who saw an ambitious woman (progressive ambition) in the final election. We then coded these 170 open-ended responses according to whether the respondent mentioned gender as a criterion of selection (1) or not (0). 16% of Democrats who saw an ambitious woman mentioned gender as a criterion of selection, compared to 4% of Republicans (N = 14 Democrats, 3 Republicans). A Pearson's Chi-squared test with Yates' continuity correction finds that this difference is significant at p=0.01. All of these responses that mention gender are listed (by party) in the Appendix (Table A5). We replicated this process for all respondents who did *not* see an ambitious woman in the final election, and

while Democrats were still more likely to mention gender as a criterion of selection compared to Republicans (in line with what we know about party differences in taste for women), the difference was smaller and not statistically significant (12% of Democrats mentioned gender, compared to 4% of Republicans, p=0.125).

Democrats overwhelmingly mention gender because they favor women candidates, often making the claim that we need more women in power – including that they particularly favor 'determined', 'assertive' types of women (e.g., "Need more visionary assertive females in leadership"; "I prefer to support the female gender for president in order to open the door to other women seeking important leadership roles in politics and to empower women overall"). Republicans, conversely, more often mention gender because they prefer male candidates (2 out of 3 responses; e.g., "youth, male"). The open-ended responses show that gendered decision-making plays a conscious role for Democrats in particular when evaluating ambitious women candidates.

Figure 6 presents results from the U.K. sample, which allows us to consider whether the main left-right findings hold across another advanced democracy, and also test the theory that far right voters will penalize ambitious women with a sample of UKIP supporters. Compared to the U.S., we see smaller differences across respondent party for women with progressive ambition. Contrary to our hypotheses, it is Conservative voters who are most favorable, with probability of support 0.55 compared to 0.52 for Labour and 0.51 for UKIP voters (these differences are not significant). This result could be explained by the Conservatives' track record on promoting women leaders: the U.K. has had two female Prime Ministers, both of them Conservatives. UKIP and the newer Brexit party have also both had women leaders. Turning to personalistic ambition, again the results show no major differences in preferences across parties for ambitious women (e.g., 'determined to succeed' and 'tough negotiator'). Note that UKIP respondents in particular favor 'assertive' men (marginal mean of 0.57, compared to Labour 0.38 and Conservative 0.38; see Appendix, Figure A20) – but assertive women do not get the same boost. Finally, the results for agenda-based ambition show that Labour and UKIP respondents are both more favorable towards women who

want to make major changes compared to Conservative voters (marginal means of 0.64, 0.58, and 0.56 respectively). Labour voters are 8 percentage points more likely to favor women with agenda-based ambition compared to Conservatives, and this difference is significant. However, we note that the same pattern can be seen for ambitious men – Labour are more supportive of candidates with agenda-based ambition in general, compared to Conservatives.

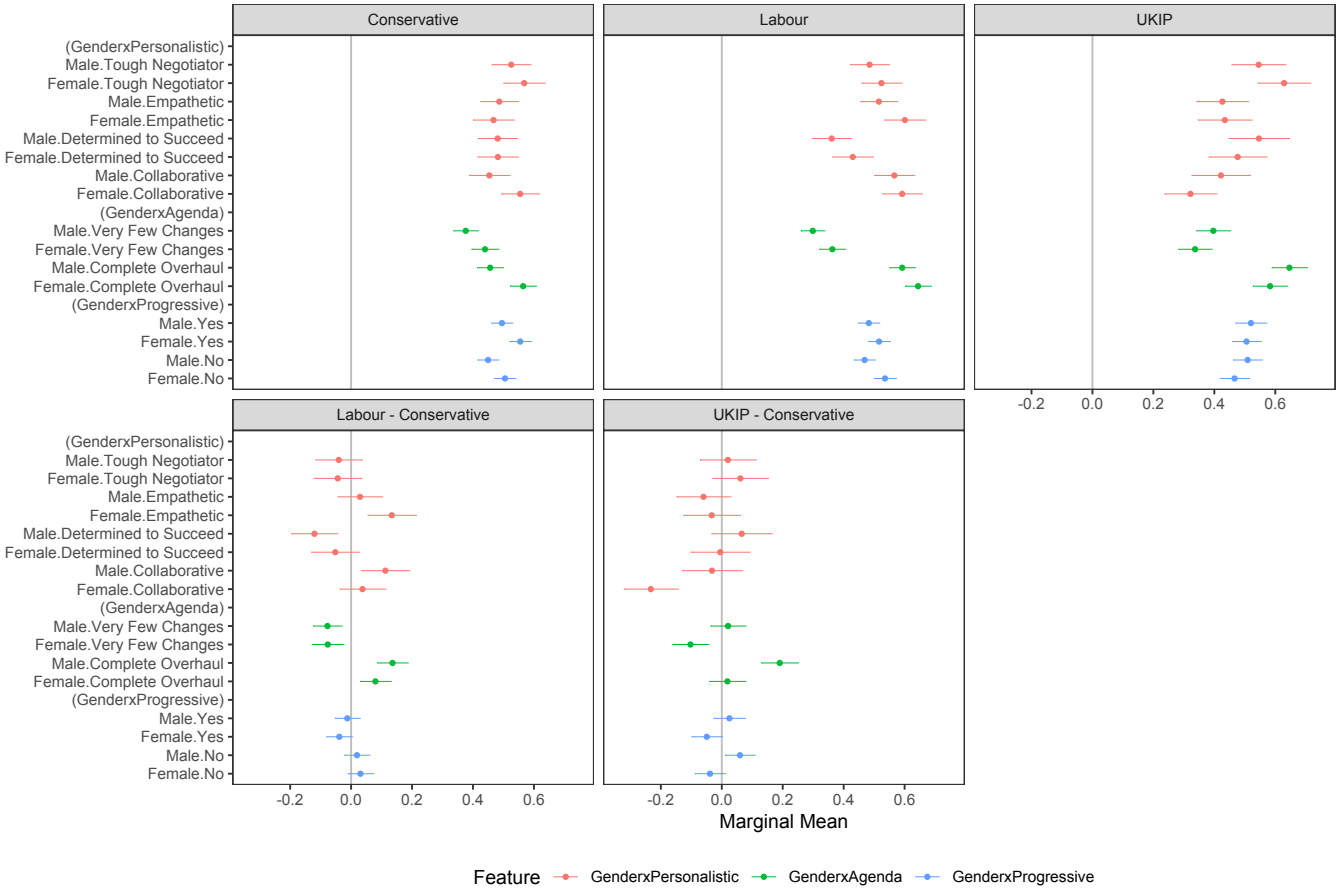

Figure 6: Conditional Marginal Means by Gender of Candidate, Labour, Conservative, and UKIP

Figures show favorability toward candidate profiles for respondents identifying as Conservative (top left panel), Labour (top center panel), UKIP (right panel), and the differences (bottom panel) using conditional marginal means. Sample size N = 869 (319 Conservative, 315 Labour, 176 UKIP), or at candidate level N = 8682 (5 elections). Only relevant individual trait coefficients presented; for full plot, see Appendix, Figure A20.

Overall, the U.K. sample shows many similarities across parties in tastes for ambitious women. Notably, we do not find evidence supporting the hypothesis that far right voters are less likely to support ambitious women candidates, although they do favor men with ambitious traits like

'assertive' more than supporters of other parties. One interpretation for this result is that despite historically regressive views on gender roles, far right parties have increasingly modernized their views on gender equality in order to use it as a wedge issue (Wodak 2015). In addition, more and more far right parties have elevated women to leadership roles (Meret 2015), and the evidence we present from the U.K. suggests that their supporters are willing to accept such ambitious women candidates. The comparison between the U.K. and U.S. thus suggests that partisanship matters, but context (including history of women in leadership and salience of gender equality issues) might play an equally important role. Given that we only present results from one convenience-based sample for the U.K., we note the need for more research on this and other international cases to further explore the role of partisanship across different contexts.

The last hypothesis suggests that women ought to be more supportive of ambitious women candidates than men. Figure 7 shows that we find some evidence of this – women support women candidates with progressive ambition more than men (marginal means of 0.55 and 0.49, $p<0.05$), and the same is true for agenda-based ambition (women wanting a 'complete overhaul' – marginal means of 0.59 and 0.51, $p<0.05$). However, we note that the representative SSI survey results do not replicate across all samples. In the other three surveys, patterns are similar but the difference between respondent gender is not significant (see Appendix page 25 for discussion). Our findings for respondent gender are not as consistent as the findings overall or for partisan ID, highlighting the need for additional studies on the conditions under which gender affinity becomes salient.

The main results hold up to several robustness checks, including: removing 'atypical' profiles that might remind voters of popular figures like Trump or Clinton, removing all elections containing the trait 'tough negotiator' (as this might particularly cue Trump), and tests to ensure results are not driven by profile order (see Appendix, pages 30-34). We also estimate models using ambitiousness quantiles derived from Average Marginal Interaction Effects, exploring the possibility that ambitious traits might have an interactive effect, and again we find no evidence that ambitious women are penalized (to save space, these results available from author).

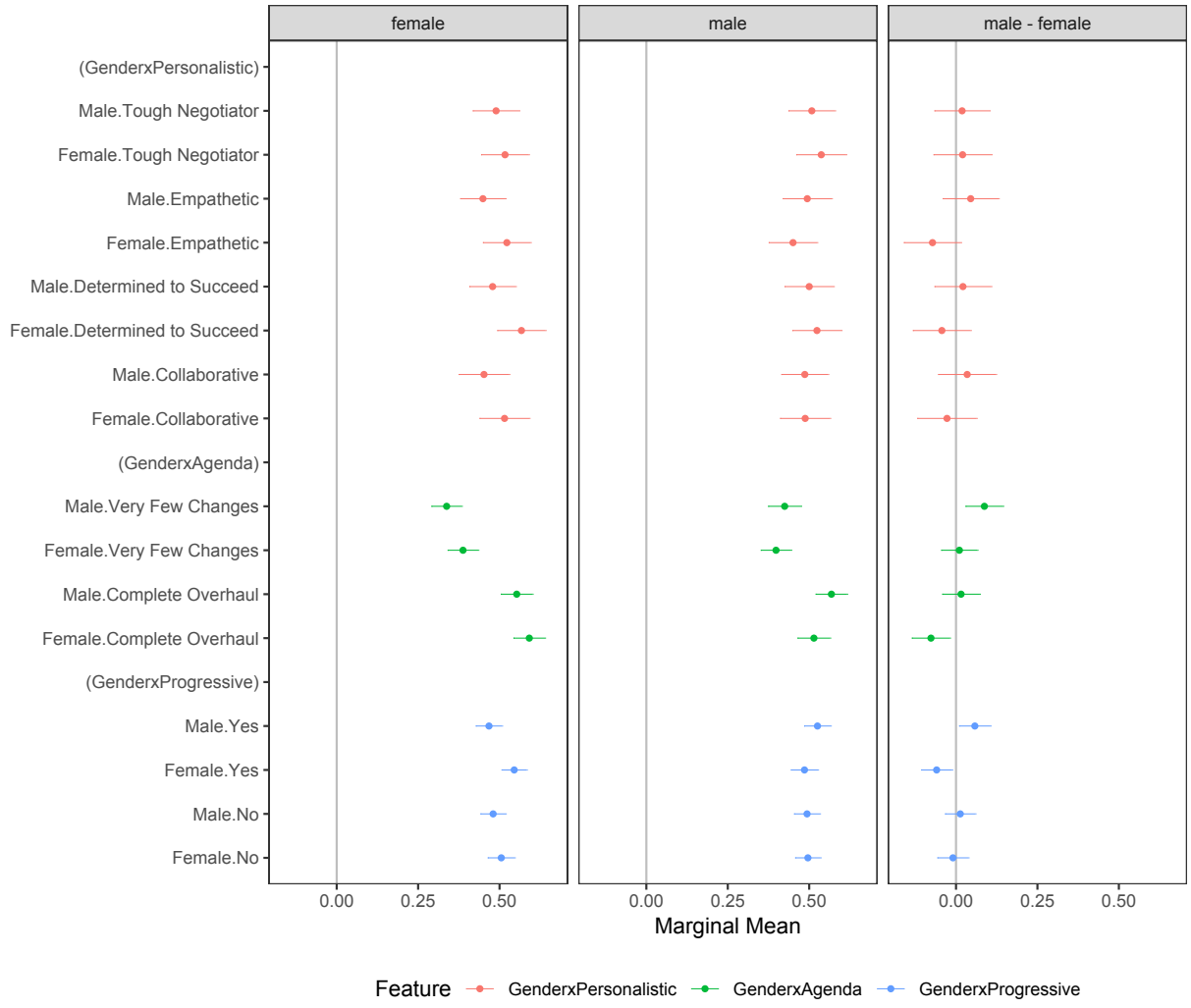

Figure 7: Conditional Marginal Means by Gender of Candidate, Male and Female Respondents

Figures show favorability toward candidate profiles for male and female respondents and the difference (right panel) using conditional marginal means. Sample size: N = 1199, (598 women and 601 men), or at candidate level 7194. Only relevant individual trait coefficients presented; for full plot, see Appendix, Figure A19.

One concern with conjoint experiments in general is that they are too artificial to accurately gauge the preferences of actual voters when they make a decision about a candidate after many months of campaigning. We note that evidence suggests that conjoint experiments mirror real-life preferences (Hainmueller, Hangartner & Yamamoto 2015, but see Clayton et al. 2019). In addition, any social desirability bias to, for example, favor women is mitigated by the fact that we do not cue respondents to think about gender before voting, and the survey is carried out online where

respondents are less likely to report socially desirable answers (Chang & Krosnick 2009). However, because we test several new concepts of candidate ambition, we acknowledge that our survey might seem particularly unusual or abstract. To alleviate these concerns, we ran the DLABSS 2 survey, which includes the three 'ambitious' traits (Personalistic, Progressive, and Agenda-based) along with gender, age, political experience, and career experience – the latter three being very commonly used in candidate evaluations (see Schwarz, Hunt & Coppock 2018). Our main results hold even when showing respondents more extensive political resumes that look more like what one might typically expect to see when assessing candidates (see Appendix, Table A3 for more).

Discussion

In this study, we evaluate how voters perceive ambition among candidates, and then test whether ambitious traits have different effects on vote choice for male and female candidates. We find that voter perceptions of candidate ambition are multidimensional. Our results show consistent evidence for three types of candidate ambition: progressive office-seeking, ambitious personality traits, and agenda-based ambition. The strength of voter support for agenda-based ambition in particular indicates that the concept is politically relevant and could be useful in other studies of candidate evaluation. Overall, female candidates with these ambitious traits are not punished – in fact, they are slightly favored. However, there are differences in taste for ambitious women across partisan identities. Democrats are more supportive of women with progressive ambition than Republicans in the U.S. (a gap of 7 percentage points), while in the U.K., parties are not as divided. These partisan differences emerge when party label is not given, a context very common in the United States in local elections and primaries. Without the cue of party, voters elevate the importance of candidate gender, and the counter-stereotypic trait of progressive ambition is negative for women on the right. We find some evidence that women are more likely to support women candidates with both progressive and agenda-based ambition compared to men, but these differences are not

significant across all survey samples analyzed.

The result that, overall, women are not punished for ambitious traits is in line with recent research indicating that explicit discrimination is not the main reason that women lack political power in advanced democracies (e.g., Lawless & Pearson 2008; Teele, Kalla & Rosenbluth 2017), and norms about women in leadership may be shifting (Bongiorno, Bain & David 2014). Yet, women remain underrepresented in parties and parliaments, particularly on the right (IPU 2019; O'Brien 2018). One of the reasons might be that women *perceive* that they will face additional discrimination (Shames 2017). Our findings should be reassuring to aspiring female candidates, especially those on the left: the results here suggest that they do not have to try to appear less ambitious to gain support – in fact, they are met with enthusiasm. For women candidates on the right, the results indicate that in the U.S., at least, there is more tempered support for women candidates with progressive office-seeking ambition. The new multidimensional concept of perceived ambition presented is useful because it shows that only progressive (and not personalistic or agenda-based) ambition is disfavored. The implication is that women on both sides of the aisle can 'lean in' to narratives about their 'determination' and path-breaking political agendas (as many have in recent elections).

A logical next step in this line of research is to survey or interview candidates themselves, to see if their experiences and perceptions of voter bias match what we find. Do women candidates, particularly those seeking to appeal to voters on the right, experience bias or criticism related to their perceived ambitiousness? Do they seek to downplay their ambitions because they think this will be penalized? This kind of research is especially important in light of recent evidence that suggests conjoint experiments of voters' preferences do not mirror candidates' experiences of bias in real life in the context of developing democracies (Clayton et al. 2019). We note that this study does not test perceptions of 'ambitious' candidates for the highest office (President or Prime Minister), or perceptions of candidates described by explicitly negative terms like 'will to power' or 'unethical'. We also do not include candidate race or ethnicity, and note that attitudes towards

ambitiousness in ethnic minority women might be different in important ways from evaluations of white women. These contexts present promising further avenues of study.

Another interesting area for future scholarship is to expand our initial U.K. results to see whether findings hold across advanced democracies, and to further explore how history, context, and institutions matter. If female leadership matters as we suggest it might in the discussion of the U.K. results, then voters in other countries with female leaders such as Germany ought to have more favorable views on ambitious women in politics. Different institutions, such as proportional representation or gender quotas which facilitate the election of more women (and women in leadership roles) (Norris 1985; Paxton, Hughes & Painter 2010; O'Brien & Rickne 2016), might lead to less bias against 'ambitious' women candidates.

Ethics Declarations

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

The questionnaire and methodology for this study was approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of Harvard University (Ethics approval number: IRB17-1171) and the University of Bath (Ethics approval number: S17-027).

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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